

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

April 29, 2013

No school choice: What will school districts do? Superintendents ponder the current dilemma (Saline Courier, Benton)

Arkansas school officials are up in arms. For years the school districts have been trading students back and forth through the Arkansas School Choice Act and that plan already was in the works for another school term.

A few days ago, a federal judge determined, however, that the act is illegal and has issued a ruling saying school districts must cease and desist in regard to this practice.

U.S. District Judge Robert Dawson ruled that the provision of the law dealing with race violates the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Since, he said, it couldn't be separated from the rest, he declared the entire act unconstitutional.

In his ruling, Dawson wrote: "The state must employ a more nuanced, individualized evaluation of school and student needs, which, while they may include race as one component, may not base enrollment or transfer options solely on race."

The state had argued the the provision in the Arkansas Public School Choice Act of 1989 was needed to preserve desegregation efforts.

Dawson's ruling came in a lawsuit filed by a group of parents who argued that they should be given the option of putting their children in the school district of their choice without the limits placed on them by the race provision.

Andi Davis, a lawyer for the Malvern parents, said initially that she was pleased by the decision, but had hoped the judge would strike down only the portion about race rather than the whole law.

After a cursory reading of the judge's decision, Davis reportedly remarked, "The school choice is gone." Arkansas Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell reportedly has asked his staff to review how the ruling will affect students, parents and districts.

He said the education department staff will work with the state attorney general's office to determine what legal steps, if any, the department will take.

According to Kimbrell, the statute struck down by Dawson is "one of a few statutes in Arkansas that allows students to attend school at a school district other than the school district in which the student resides."

Superintendents of the four school districts in Saline County, as well as one outlying district, were asked for their thoughts on the issue. Their comments follow.

Benton District

Benton school officials are joining school district officials throughout the state as all face a dilemma about school choice.

School choice is the system that's been used in Arkansas public school districts since the late 1980s, noted Dan Jordan, acting superintendent. "Where does it go from here now that a federal judge has said 'no more'?

"The truth of the matter appears to be that at this juncture, no one knows what the federal judge's decision really means, Jordan pointed out.

"Right now in the Benton district, we have 368 students enrolled through school choice and more have applied to attend for the coming year through that law," he said.

Those 368 students were part of a total enrollment of 4,587 at the close of the 2011-12 school term.

"The deadline to enroll through school choice is July 1, and we've got to have some kind of directive telling us what we're supposed to do," he said.

"I told the board and our administrators that the judge has ruled public school choice to be illegal, so we're just waiting now to hear from the state Education Department.

"We don't know what they intend for us to do," he said.

"With that July 1 deadline looming, we're hoping we hear something within the week as to our directive," Jordan said.

"We don't know if this is immediate," he said. "And what about those previously accepted — do they get to stay put? Will there be an appeal?

"Right now, we have more questions than we have answers until we get some word out of the state department," he said.

"This could be huge to some districts and not as big for others," Jordan said.

"When we hear the final rules and regulations of the thing, we'll know then what it will mean to us," he said.

"We were a little surprised by the judge's ruling," Jordan said. "The original lawsuit was filed due to the racial limitations, but the judge didn't just strike that part — he struck the whole law."

Jordan also questioned whether there will be a transition period if the judge's ruling truly means that school-choice enrollments have ceased.

"We keep asking, are we really going to stop? Sever the line and send all students back who are living in another district?

"We can see the results of the litigation. It's not just us; every district in the state will be affected.

"In the meantime, we're still collecting the applications for those wanting to enroll through school choice," Jordan said. "We're going to have to be given directions as to what it really means, so we know what we have to do."

Bryant District

The Bryant School District, parents and students — like employees and patrons of all Arkansas public schools — also find themselves in a registration dilemma, following Judge Dawson's ruling that the Arkansas School Choice law is unconstitutional.

As of Oct. 1, 2011, the Bryant District student population stood at 8,292, according to Communications Director Jessica Bollen.

"There were 140 students who transferred to the district in the 2011-2012 school year because of school choice," Bollen said. "So far, there are 154 applicants for next year."

Bollen said 159 students were approved transfers out of the district.

Dawson's decision will have an impact on all school districts in the county for various reasons — whether it be funding, perceived quality of education or simply personal preference.

The lawsuit was filed by white, Malvern parents whose child was denied transfer out of the Malvern School District to attend the Magnet Cove District because they did not meet the race provision outlined in the School Choice Law.

The family is appealing Dawson's ruling, maintaining its scope is too broad — that only the clause regarding race should be eliminated as opposed to the entire law.

Still other questions have arisen, such as whether students who are currently enrolled in a district through school choice should be granted permission to remain in the district and only new applicants be denied.

"If this judge's ruling stands, this will affect the district," said Don McGohan, assistant superintendent for human resources. "When you consider our numbers, it won't have a big impact. It does, however, affect parents being able to make choices for their children. We are on hold until we hear otherwise."

Bauxite District

The new superintendent in the history-rich Bauxite School District could possibly face his greatest challenge to date thanks to the federal judge's ruling on the Arkansas School Choice law. And all this in the very first year that Jerrod Williams is grasping the helm of leadership.

What Judge Dawson may not know is that during the 2011-2012 school year about 400 of the 1,520 students enrolled in the Bauxite School District were there through Arkansas School Choice. And for the upcoming 2012-2013 school year, Williams said there are already 94 new applicants from parents hoping their children can be added to that total through this process.

"That's 26.2 percent of the student population," Williams said. "Many parents are wanting their children to come to Bauxite schools because we still have that small school atmosphere, but still offer many of the same programs as the bigger school districts."

And the Bauxite School District has been able to maintain the small school feel that lets teachers have more one-on-one relationships with the students despite being the seventh-fastest growing school district in Arkansas for the past nine years. The school district experienced so much growth that several years ago, the plan was made to construct the first middle school facility in the district. In 2010, the doors to the 74,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art Bauxite Middle School finally opened to the public.

But the continued growth that officials in Bauxite schools have experienced and grown accustomed to for numerous years could suddenly come to a halt thanks to Judge Dawson. But Williams said it is "much too early" to know what the future holds not only for parents who are applying for their children to attend, but also for the children who are already approved to attend through a previous year's acceptance through school choice.

"The decision threw everyone for a loop," Williams said. "But right now we are just watching and waiting. We are listening to advice from numerous attorneys (including school district attorney Paul Blume and various attorneys for the Arkansas Department of Education) ... we are watching this situation very closely."

He also said that the school district is formalizing a letter to send to hundreds of parents whose children already attend through school choice or who are wanting their children to attend. The letter is not completed, and then there is the issue of mailing out close to 400 letters.

"We want to be able to put parents' minds at ease, yet let them know that when we find something out, we'll let them know," Williams said. "We are very blessed to have so many students here. Right now it is just a wait and see what awaits in the future."

He still believes that Bauxite is the place for his future even if things take a sudden dramatic turn in enrollment figures.

"I believe we should have shared visions and not just for this year, but for 10 to 15 years from now," Williams told The Saline Courier when he was first hired. "There is a tremendous amount of pride in Bauxite schools and I hope to keep it that way. I actually visited Bauxite a few times before I even

applied to see if it is comfortable situation and if it is a good fit. I believe Bauxite is a great place to raise a family and know it will be a good fit."

Harmony Grove District

Harmony Grove, one of the smallest school districts in the county, housed slightly more than 50 students through the Arkansas School Choice Act in the 2011-2012 school year, and 20 students from the Harmony Grove district went to other schools last year.

But with the act now back in court, there is a chance that all of this will be no more come fall.

"I hate to see it," Harmony Grove Superintendent Daniel Henley said. "I hate it for the students and parents."

Thus far this summer, Harmony Grove already has approved 40 students for the upcoming school year. Only six students have chosen to leave in 2012-13.

"You would hope that (the courts) would grandfather in the students that have been a part of School Choice," Henley said. "I also think the kids that have already been approved should be allowed to attend."

Henley added that he has been attending meetings all week and no one really knows what is going to happen.

"It is all in limbo at this time," he said.

As of right now, Henley and the rest of the Harmony Grove district is "operating under the idea that the approved students will get to come to Harmony Grove in the fall."

"This is until someone tells me different," he said.

Glen Rose District

Glen Rose, just like every other school in the county, will be affected if the courts uphold the federal judge's ruling to abolish the Arkansas School Choice Act.

In 2012-13, Glen Rose had 30-plus students enrolled through School Choice.

"Nobody knows what is going to happen right now," Glen Rose Superintendent Nathan Gills said.

"We know what the judge said, but both sides have started their complaints in the case and have filed motions. Until we know what the results of those are, we just don't know whether school choice is going to be open to everyone, whether it will be closed or if those attending other schools will be grandfathered in."

Forest Park Elementary seeks alumni to finish project (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Organizers of a months long campaign to build an athletic pavilion and jogging track for the 100-year-old Forest Park Elementary School in Little Rock are appealing to alumni and friends, both near and far, for the final \$20,000 to finish the project.

Once completed, the Forest Park Centennial Athletic Pavilion project will be the largest gift ever donated to the Little Rock School District by a school PTA, according to district records.

About \$300,000 has been raised since September. Planners are now seeking the additional \$20,000 for a synthetic turf surface that will go into the oval space inside the track and some athletic equipment.

The deadline for raising that money is Friday, said Jennifer Ronnel, Forest Park's PTA president.

That's the day when planners will turn in the order for the engraved bricks that will make up the short walls and the columns of the Forest Park Centennial Athletic Pavilion. The bricks, engraved with donor names and messages, range in cost from \$500 to \$5,000.

"There is no great directory or database of Forest Park alumni," Ronnel said last week. "We have tried in lots of different ways to reach out to the community to locate our alums. But even at this final point, we feel there are some people out there who don't even know about this project or know about the school's centennial year who would want for their grandchild or for themselves to buy an engraved brick and be a part of this snapshot of Forest Park's history."

More information about the bricks is available by sending an e-mail to forestpark100@gmail.com or calling the fundraising chairman, Peyton Woodyard, at (501) 960-0539. Tax-deductible contributions to the project also can be sent to Forest Park PTA at P.O. Box 7602, Little Rock, Ark., 72217.

The fundraising campaign began in September for the pavilion and jogging track, which will support physical education, outdoor play, after-school care and special events at the 450-pupil school.

Right now, school hallways and the small entrance foyer are used by pupils for physical activity during inclement weather, Ronnel said.

The school's original cafeteria was long ago turned into classrooms and the original auditorium converted to a cafeteria that is used most of the school day for serving school meals, she said.

One former Forest Park first-grader who grew up under the watchful eyes of the state and nation is a contributor to the effort, Ronnel said. Chelsea Clinton, daughter of former President Bill Clinton and former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, has a brick on order.

Construction on the pavilion is scheduled to begin June 7 and be completed by the start of the 2013-14 school year. Cromwell Architects, Nabholz Construction, Staley Electric, Ketcher Roofing and Arkansas

Fence and Guardrail are the companies participating in the development of the pavilion, which will include electricity and some security features.

“Forest Park Elementary is 100 years old,” said Woodyard, the fundraising campaign chairman. “This is our birthday present to the school district and to the Forest Park children for generations to come.”

Some schools rethink class ranking by GPA (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

When seniors across Northwest Arkansas don caps and gowns for graduation ceremonies next month, many graduates receiving special recognition will wear special stoles, cords and tassels during their commencement ceremonies.

The recognition given to graduating seniors for high academic achievement differs by district and reflects priorities of each high school.

For example, Bentonville High School and Northside and Southside high schools in Fort Smith continue long traditions of reporting the class rank of graduating seniors and determining a single valedictorian and salutatorian.

Other high schools in Northwest Arkansas have developed alternate forms of recognizing students for high academic achievement. At Fayetteville High School, all graduating seniors with grade-point averages above 4.0 are named valedictorian. The two Rogers high schools rank students and give special diplomas but do not name valedictorians.

Rogers Heritage High School Principal Karen Steen and Rogers High School Principal Robert Moore propose to end the district’s class rank policy, however, starting with the graduating class of 2017.

At the end of each school year, officials for the two high schools in Fort Smith calculate a grade-point average for all graduating seniors based on coursework and grades they earned from ninth through 12th grade, said Martin Mahan, Fort Smith Public Schools director of secondary education. Students earn a higher grade-point for Advanced Placement courses than for other courses.

Students are ranked by their grade-point averages and the top student is named as the first in class, with the second-highest student named second in class, Mahan said. During graduation ceremonies, the first and second in class are honored, as are the top 5 percent of the graduating class. Honors diplomas are given to graduates who maintained at least a 3.0 grade-point average and passed eight pre-Advanced Placement or Advanced Placement courses.

“It encourages students to do their very best, to concentrate on their grades, to be cognizant of the grades they had last semester,” Mahan said. “It gives us something to motivate students with a form of competition.”

The traditional system encourages students to take upper-level courses to raise their grade-point averages, he said.

SUCCESS IS NOT A NUMBER

Fayetteville High School, Huntsville and Harrison high schools name students with grade-point averages over 4.0 as valedictorians. Students can earn more than a 4.0 by taking Advanced Placement courses.

Fayetteville High School anticipates naming 47 valedictorians in the Class of 2013, said Anne Butt, the school's college adviser.

"Their achievement is not just a number," Butt said. "It can also be strength of schedule. It can be difficult to define a true No. 1."

At Huntsville High School, seniors with over a 4.0 grade-point average also must have taken 11 advanced courses and two years of the same foreign language to be named valedictorian, high school Counselor Anna Chappell said. This year, the high school anticipates naming seven valedictorians who will each give a speech during graduation.

Valedictorians of Huntsville High School typically have strong organizational skills, high intelligence, are social and involved in school and community programs, Chappell said.

Past valedictorians have gone to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford University. One expected valedictorian with the Class of 2013 is headed to Emory University in Atlanta on a full scholarship. Others have gone to Arkansas universities, as well.

Their grade-point averages range from 4.15 to 4.2, Chappell said.

"When they're that high up and they've all taken a minimum of 11 honors and pre-Advanced Placement classes, how can you make a difference in them?" Chappell said. "They're so exceptional."

HONORS FOR MORE STUDENTS

At both Heritage and Rogers high schools, students earn "quality points" based on their grades for most courses taken from ninth through 12th grade, Steen said.

For years, students taking two years of the same foreign language and completing Advanced Placement courses have graduated with honors.

The honors diplomas require a minimum 3.3 grade point average and minimum of 92 "quality points." Students who exceed those requirements can earn diplomas for "high honors" and "distinguished honors."

Steen and Moore began studying the policy and have proposed some changes, including ending the calculation of class rank, which is based on the number of quality points students earn. The School Board is studying the proposal and could vote on the proposed changes May 21.

The principals both said the class rank is reported to colleges but isn't used for any other purpose.

The district's existing policy does not allow students to earn quality points for many courses. For example, students do not earn quality points for English-as-a-second-language courses, special education courses, and courses taken outside the school day such as swimming.

Steen said officials began to question the reason for ranking students. Steen and Moore began researching the importance of class rank and found that many high schools nationwide no longer report class rank and its importance has decreased for college admissions officers, Steen said.

Ending the class rank encourages students to take difficult courses and earn high grades to earn the special diplomas, but discourages competition among students, Steen said. All students who have the opportunity to be recognized as honors graduates.

And even though some English-as-a-second-language students meet all other requirements for an honors diploma including taking Advanced Placement courses, many do not earn enough quality points to graduate with honors because the English as a second language courses haven't counted, Moore said.

The proposed changes would allow all students to pursue an honors diploma, Moore said. They still must earn high grade-point averages, take advanced courses and earn quality points.

"There's a better way for us to recognize kids who work hard," Moore said.